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ABSTRACT

A study examined the impact of oral language competence on the writing behavior of secondary students of English as a second language (ESL). Samples of student writing in both the native Spanish and English were analyzed along five dimensions (topic of the composition, internal organization of thoughts, conveying meaning, sentence construction, and mechanics) and by two quantitative measures (number of main independent clauses and total words per composition). The profile describing the writing performance of each student was then compared to his oral proficiency test score. It was found that the greatest overall difficulty with the ESL writing was lack of vocabulary. No composition received full credit on any of the five dimensions studied. Most students were able to group sentences into paragraphs, but still needed help on organizational strategies such as logical beginnings or introductions and conclusions. Some students showed parallel abilities in both native and second languages, but others showed unequal competence in the two languages. Oral language development could have an effect on writing behavior, but oral language proficiency scores may not indicate what to expect of the students' composing behavior. More prewriting activities and increased class time on each topic are recommended. (MSE)

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RELATIONSHIP OF ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND WRITING BEHAVIORS OF SECONDARY SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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RELATIONSHIP OF ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND WRITING BEHAVIORS OF SECONDARY SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

In the past teaching composition was perceived as a linear process. Classroom instruction and texts focused on extensive outlining prior to writing; then drafting and revising the composition took place. Much of the emphasis was on form, and revision was a process of formal editing. Curriculum materials prepared the students to write by means of grammar exercises. Composition models were analyzed to help pupils develop the proper writing styles. Students were lead through carefully structured exercises by writing first the topic sentence, next supporting statements, and then paragraphs.

However, systematic progression from controlled to free writing has in recent years been criticized. It appears that extensive study of grammar and models of writing alone did not build better writers as supposed (Taylor, 1981). Instead of understanding and being able to participate in the composing process, model-based teaching often encouraged students to simply reproduce another writer's product (Watson, 1982). The assumption that one could guide students beginning with tightly controlled exercises tapering off toward free composition was erroneous. Students too often became dependent on the structured approach and had difficulty bridging the wide gap from guided to free composition (Buckingham and Pech, 1976).

Recent research has reiterated the weaknesses of previous product-based models of instruction. "Research has revealed that composing is a non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning (Zamel, 1983, p. 165)." Moreover, as a part of the writing process, studies have delineated certain stages through which students progress. These appear to

be the same for first language (L1) learners as well as second language (L2) learners; the only difference being that what the writer already knows about the writing process in the native (L1) language can simply be carried over to the second language (Edelsky, 1982).

Three stages of writing are described by Vann (1981). In level one, writing is relatively undifferentiated from speech. Thus, a student's oral competence impacts on writing ability. At this phase of writing, sentences are often short and redundant much like the beginning speech of the learner. In stage two, the focus is on form, on producing correct sentences. Pupils can become trapped at this stage of writing when the prescriptive and formulaic curriculum of the past is imposed. Then correctness is perceived as the ultimate goal even if meaning and expression are sacrificed.

At level three, the chief difference is the level of maturity of writing. The student possesses more lexicon and syntactic skill and is able to implement these in composing.

Research indicates that more attention should be focused on the classroom implications of the composing process. Teachers of second language learners should provide ample time for class discussion prior to writing; time for students to jot down ideas or to make mental note of certain possibilities rather than requiring an extensive formal outline. Zamel (1982) concurs and notes that second language learners have greater anxiety attached to assigned topics that have not been discussed previously or ones that are not of interest to them. Thus, especially in the beginning stages of writing, it is important for students to write about what is known and what is of interest to them personally.

This paper describes the writing behavior of secondary level English

as a Second Language (ESL) students and the impact of oral language competence on their writing.

THE STUDY

Several states mandate that ESL students receive special language training at secondary level if they score below a specific designated oral proficiency test level. The ESL students in this study were identified and tested with the Language Assessment Scale Test II (LAS-II) for placement in an ESL program. In the spring of 1986, writing samples were collected from a high school ESL class. This class was composed of eleven students of varying language abilities. Not only was the class multilevel, but it was also multiethnic. Both Hispanic and Asian cultures and languages were represented.

During a two month period, sixty-one writing samples were collected in order to determine the types of writing done at this level and the proficiency level of the students. Nine of the samples were written in the students' first language while the remaining fifty-two were written in English, the students' new language. All samples reflected assigned writing tasks; no free writing was elicted from students. Topics ranged from writing about their favorite relatives or their most memorable moment to the pros and cons of American schools.

Writing samples were evaluated by means of an analytical writing profile (Perkins, 1983) which breaks each composition into component parts for scoring purposes. Each paper was evaluated along five dimensions: topic of the composition, internal organization of thoughts, conveying meaning, sentence construction, and mechanics. Two quantitative measures were also utilized, total number of t-units (main independent clauses) and total number of words per composition. The student profile which describes

the writing performance of each student was then compared with the LAS oral proficiency test score.

Average length of the compositions ranged from 19 to 100 total words. Average number of t-units per composition ranged from 2.5 to 11. Average length of t-unit per composition ranged from 4.8 words to 13.5 words.

For the first few written tasks, no prior preparation was provided. Students were simply given the topic and told to write. The last writing topics, however, were handled somewhat differently. Students were first told to write what they liked or disliked about American schools. The next day the class spent some time discussing American schools. Then the students switched their position from the previous day's assignment. Finally, the third day students described what they liked most about America, in general. Thus, discussion was incorporated into the writing program. Also the topics for writing were thematically related for several days. For some students this resulted in an overall gain in total number of words per composition. When comparing the first set of unrelated compositions with the last of related ones, eight of the twelve students wrote more total words in the last ones.

The greatest difficulty overall with this L2 writing was lack of vocabulary. In general, students were able to convey meaning, but they were hampered in their attempts to elaborate on the topic by their limited vocabulary. No composition received full credit on any of the five analytical scoring dimensions. Although some students had a good grasp of their topic and could organize their thoughts sequentially and logically, they lacked the language to expand and provide further detail. In other words, all the writing needed to be fleshed out with further description and information.

The majority of the students demonstrated the ability to group most sentences together to form a paragraph. However, most still needed help on organizational strategies such as logical beginnings or introductions and conclusions. One young girl was obviously at a complete loss because her only writing strategy was to put down a list of simple sentences. When given a picture of a popular rock singer to describe, this student began each sentence with 'she', and her paragraph was a numbered list of short, repetitive sentences not description. Her concluding sentence was totally unrelated to the topic. Several students threw in unrelated details. Perhaps this was done because they felt they needed to fill up the empty space on the paper, a case of longer must be better.

When comparing L1 and L2 texts, some students demonstrated parallel abilities in L1 and L2 while others showed unequal competence levels in L1 and L2. Second language learners can transfer their general knowledge of the L1 writing process to their L2. Thus, more skilled L2 writers can transcend their lexical difficulties because they understand the process of writing and how to generate meaning. They have devised strategies for putting their ideas down on paper. Less skilled L2 writers get trapped in their lack of vocabulary and their lack of writing skills, in general. In this study two of the students who wrote in both L1 and L2 were able to generate twice the number of total words in Spanish as they were in English. The remainder of the students had more parallel L1 and L2 texts with total number of words and total number of t-units per composition somewhat equal.

Yet parallel texts does not necessarily signal language growth and proficiency. At least one student had major difficulties with both L1 and L2 writing. This may be an indication of little or no actual skill

development in either language.

Does oral language proficiency impact on writing behavior? The research seems to point in that direction. When Vann (1981) discusses the acquisition of writing, she notes that oral competence affects writing. In fact, in the beginning stages of writing, compositions look like speech written down. Yet for this study, no real correlation between the LAS oral language proficiency test scores and the students' writing profile scores seemed to exist. However, oral language development activities prior to the last set of writing activities did have an impact. It may be that the LAS is not an adequate measure of total oral language proficiency, and the teachers must utilize other means to assess oral language proficiency as well. In addition, the LAS may not tap into the oral language skills needed for writing.

To conclude, an examination of writing samples from secondary ESL students demonstrated that oral language development could have an effect on writing behavior. However, oral language proficiency test scores may not indicate what to expect in the composing behavior of L2 learners.

Classroom Implications

Growth in composing ability in L1 or L2 depends on knowledge of the writing process in general as well as growth in lexicon. Because L2 vocabulary is limited in the beginning stages of acquisition of a language, teacher emphasis must be on massive input and oral language development. As seen from the study, discussing a topic prior to writing can impact on the amount of language a student is able to generate. With more language on the page, the student is able to receive more feedback from the teacher.

Yet discussing a topic is only one mode of oral language development. Other pre-writing strategies include presenting students with a problem or

situation and then brainstorming options prior to beginning writing. Students may also participate in a webbing activity in which they begin with a central core such as American schools and then branch out with descriptors both pro and con. This can be further extended into a language lesson, and the class can talk about nouns (places and people in the school), verbs (school activities), etc. More active pre-writing strategies would include role playing of vocabulary or situations prior to writing.

Furthermore, L2 learners especially need increased time on a topic before moving on. Writing assignments given in a hit or miss fashion with one attempt at composing before moving on do not provide opportunity for language growth. Teachers need to incorporate conferencing techniques, peer editing, and publishing activities in the L2 classroom. For instance, the assignment about what students liked and disliked about American schools could have been further expanded. The class could have begun the week with a discussion and webbing activity on American schools. Afterward, students would write in either L1 or L2 and have an opportunity for teacher/peer feedback via conferences and group editing. Students could choose their best effort on this topic, either pro or con, and work this into a published book that could be illustrated and bound for the class. Thus, the L2 learners have an opportunity to participate in the entire writing process from beginning to end.

Second language learners can communicate in written form, and teachers need to provide ample opportunity for them to do so. Only if L2 learners are given a chance to develop vocabulary, writing skills, and their knowledge of the composing process will acquisition be enhanced.

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